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Vets air concerns at town hall

Sen. Ron Wyden says Eastern Oregon vets need to have say in proposal to change VA services

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — Veterans in North-eastern Oregon raised a number of questions and issues Saturday, June 4, during a virtual town hall meeting to discuss possible Veterans Administration changes to delivering health care in the area.

This was the first of three virtual meetings Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden is holding for veterans to give input in the wake of vets at a recent Union County town hall expressing concerns over a proposal to move some VA health care services from Walla Walla to Spokane.

“The veterans who participated were particularly troubled about what they felt was the direct touch that’s so important for veterans health care was just going away from the rural part of the state,” Wyden told those attending the June 4 event.

Following the Union County meeting, he said, he contacted Dr. Teresa Boyd, network director for VISN 20, the VA Northwest Health Network, and Scott Kelter, medical center director of the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center in Walla Walla, where many veterans in North-eastern Oregon go for services. They both agreed to participate in the three town halls.

Wyden said local veterans are “troubled by a whirlwind of hasty changes, involving a new electronic health record system, delays in delivery of care and recommendations to move VA care further away from Eastern Oregon.” He added he was concerned North-eastern Oregon veterans did not get enough voice in the changes and proposals, and he wanted to make sure the Veterans Administration was not making “some shortsighted cost cutting” at the expense of veterans.

Wyden then opened the floor to questions for Boyd and Kelter.

Staffing at center of delays

Veteran Ken McCormack, chair of the veteran advisory council for the La Grande community-based outpatient clinic, or CBOC, was first up with several matters.

Community care in La Grande can mean waiting on the phone 20 to 30 minutes for someone to answer because of short staffing, he said, and reimbursement for travel is backed up to last summer. He also said the call center in Walla Walla seems to drop messages and has to handle a larger area than in the past. He also said it took six months for the La Grande facility to hire a registered nurse and another month for the new hire to learn the system.

Kelter said most delays are due to staffing issues.

“We have been trying every hiring flexibility that is available to recruit staff,” he

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The Observer, File

ABOVE: La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza delivers opening remarks at a school board meeting Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021. In the spring of 2022, Mendoza presented a spending plan for the 2022-23 school year that, based on declining enrollment, calls for cutting nine positions.

Positions on the line

Falling enrollment may force La Grande School District to cut nine positions but not lay off any employees

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A budget shortfall caused by declining enrollment is darkening the La Grande School District’s financial horizon.

The shaky outlook has prompted the school district to submit a proposed \$29.65 million general fund budget for 2022-23 that which calls for nine positions to be cut.

The good news is that there would be no layoffs since reductions would be made through attrition, according to La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza. The positions that would be cut are either currently not filled, will be vacated due to retirement and the like, or the employee will be moved to another position



Dick Mason/The Observer, File

BELOW LEFT: La Grande School District fifth grade teacher Missy Rinker conducts a virtual parent-teacher conference Oct. 29, 2020. Falling enrollment, which district officials partially blame on the fallout from the pandemic, prompted the school district to submit a proposed general fund 2022-23 budget of \$29.65 million that may require eliminating several positions.

students position, saving nearly \$13,800.

Mendoza has presented the spending plan calling for these moves to the school district’s budget committee. The budget committee may vote on whether to recommend the proposed 2022-23 budget be adopted by the school board when it meets at 5:30 p.m. on Wednesday, June 8, in the district’s board meeting room at Willow School, 1305 N. Willow St.

The \$29.65 million general fund budget being considered is up \$2.58 million from the present budget. Much of the increase

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within the district.

“In some cases there will be involuntary transfers,” Mendoza said.

He said three full-time teaching positions, a portion of one administrative position and six classified staff positions would be eliminated as a result of the reductions. Classified positions include cooks, cus-

todians and maintenance staff. Cutting the three teaching positions would save almost \$299,000 and trimming the six classified positions would save more than \$236,000.

In addition to the nine position cuts, the proposed budget calls for an assistant principal position to be reduced to a dean of

La Grande graduates 111 during June 4 ceremony



Sonnet Jensen receives her diploma from La Grande High School Principal Brett Baxter on Saturday, June 4, 2022.

‘Don’t ever forget who you are,’ students are told

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — The 111 members of La Grande High School’s 2022 graduating class received words of inspiration Saturday, June 4, at their commencement ceremony from their guest speaker, LHS art teacher Rich McIlmoil.

But first McIlmoil made sure that a fallen classmate of theirs, Izah “Gonzo” Nicolas Gonzalez, is never forgotten. Gonzalez, who grew up in La Grande and was a student of McIlmoil’s when he taught at La Grande Middle School,

died in 2018 at age 14.

“His family and friends meant everything to him. Izah would do anything in the world for them,” McIlmoil said. “If you were having a bad day, he would make it better. He had such a big, kind, loving heart.”

McIlmoil said Gonzalez was remarkable and never gave up.

“Sadly, we lost a very special young man. I’m sorry I am still struggling and miss him,” he said during the LHS commencement ceremony. “This is from me, his brother and his mom.

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La Grande, Oregon
Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com. More contact info on Page A4.